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Breaking Bondage:

Sylvia Plath's Struggle with the "Blood Sisterhood"[1]

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【要旨】

アメリカの女流詩人シルヴィア・プラス（1932-1963）の作品にたびたび登場する血による女性の結びつき――すなわち彼女が自身の詩 "Blackberrying" のなかで用いている "blood sisterhood"――は、彼女の詩学を理解するうえで重要であるにもかかわらず、これまで十分な注意が払われていない。"Tulips," "Blackberrying," "Medusa"といった作品における血ないし血による連帯のイメジャリは、女性が置かれた生理学的な状況や母娘関係といった束縛の象徴としての性質を持つ。プラスは"blood sisterhood"に対して一貫して否定的であり、この血の絆からの脱出を詩のなかで繰り返し試みる点に彼女の超越願望を読み取ることが出来る。

自らを肉体的、精神的に閉じ込めている血の絆から脱出しようとするプラスの試みは必ずしも成功していない。しかし到底脱出できそうにもない絆に対して彼女が抱えている複雑な思いは、非理性的で言葉にしにくいものであるのにもかかわらず、語り手と「血の姉妹」との関係性のなかに浮かび上がる形で、見事に表現されている。

Introduction

"Being enclosed—in plaster, in a bell jar, a cellar or a waxhouse—and then being liberated from an enclosure by a maddened or suicidal or [']hairy and ugly['] avatar of the self is," Sandra M. Gilbert writes in her essay on Sylvia Plath, "A Fine, White Flying Myth," "at the heart of the myth that we piece together from Plath's poetry, fiction, and life." Gilbert continues, "[t]he story told is invariably a story of being

[1] An early version of this paper was accepted as a master's thesis by Kobe City University of Foreign Studies in February 2015.

trapped, by society or by the self as an agent of society, and then somehow escaping or trying to escape" (251). Plath's poetry indeed shows how she is bothered by the confines which enclose her in various ways and how then she unremittingly struggles to express her situation and her irrational impulses to escape it. Although the poet is confined, her poems often show certain significant signs of liberation.

Among those confines, what fetters especially the mind and body of Sylvia Plath as a woman poet is the female bond of blood; that is, to use her own words, the "blood sisterhood" (*Collected Poems* 168).[2] And it is that bloody connection which women are destined for from birth to death. While "plaster" and other enclosures listed by Gilbert are external, blood is uniquely an internal confinement—it flows in the poet and maintains her life. Although it is also confined in narrow vessels, it knits a strong tie between women and ironically confines the poet herself. In this case, the poet does not have any proper avatar which liberates herself in some poems. Therefore the "blood sisterhood" is a rather fatal, unbreakable bond ordered by blood—it had already been inside her when she was born in the world.

This "blood sisterhood" seems to represent two kinds of blood-bond between women in Plath's poetry. As is actually suggested in the poem "Blackberrying," it refers first of all to the female bond of blood under a certain physiological condition, which connects Plath and blood-colored motifs in her poetry. From 1959 to 1962, Plath experienced childbirths, a miscarriage and an appendectomy. As the poems written in those years—actually her latest years well known as her most prolific years, too—show, the pain and agony which she underwent through those obstetric experiences particular to women greatly heightened her consciousness of the female and maternal identity. Being strongly conscious of pains particular to her sex, she came to have a keen sense of blood; that is reflected in her frequent use of blood-colored motifs which symbolize the series of maternal experiences she went through. Consequently, the speakers sometimes hold communion with those red colored motifs around her. Those blood-colored things are what the speaker calls "blood sisters" in her poem "Blackberrying." The poet, who tries to grasp the world based on her actual feeling which she gained through her physiological experiences, forms and explores the "blood sisterhood" between the speaker and her blood sisters in her poetry. In the first chapter of this thesis, the poet's expression of her struggle with this "blood sisterhood" in "Tulips" and "Blackberrying" will be explored. Although the instinctive, visceral

[2] All references to Plath's poems are to *Collected Poems*, and the line numbers of each poem are given parenthetically.

feeling toward gender is considered not to be easily expressed in words, the poet tries to deal with the particular feeling by carefully cultivating a relationship with her blood sisters.

The phrase "blood sisterhood" possibly implies another bond of blood, specifically of female kinship, especially the mother-daughter relationship which Plath recurrently deals with in her poetry. She generally has ambivalent feelings toward it. Some poems imply the poet's desire to go back to the mother's womb, or the filial love of infancy, while others show a fiery hatred toward the mother. Two poems which will be examined in the second chapter, "The Disquieting Muses" and "Medusa," are basically the latter, since they express the poet's suffering under the oppressive relation with her mother. Plath had been stifled by this unescapable bond of blood ever since her childhood, and then she makes attempts to escape it. However, at the same time, the firmness of the confinement is also to be emphasized, and that shows how complicated the situation which Plath explores in those poems is.

This thesis as a whole will explore how Sylvia Plath expresses her struggle with the "blood sisterhood" to which she is physically and psychologically confined. Her general attitude toward the bondage will be examined mainly through the analysis of her four poems, with some reference to her journal and interview.

1. "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood": Rejecting blood sisters

The phrase "blood sisterhood," as it is actually suggested in the poem "Blackberrying," refers first of all to the solidarity which connects Sylvia Plath and her blood sisters, a set of red-colored motifs surrounding her in her poetry. Those red-colored motifs, such as a bunch of tulips and "blue-red juices" of the blackberries, are supposed to symbolize and remind the speaker of pain and agony from a series of physiological experiences through their blood-like color. Then the speakers of Plath's poems often hold communion with their blood sisters in the midst of their musing on being a woman. Though this bond of blood can arouse a strong sense of affinity or solidarity against tyrannies of blood, Plath mostly shows a repulsion for it, to which she is physically and psychologically confined. Thus she who has a deep wish to transcend her wretched gender desires to be severed from rigid shackles.

1.1 Desire to be "utterly empty" fettered by "tulips"

After giving birth to her first daughter, Frieda, in 1960, Sylvia Plath became pregnant again in the following year but had a miscarriage, which was followed by an

operation of appendectomy. The poem "Tulips," which was written just after the surgery, has a speaker who is very much like Sylvia Plath herself, who was anesthetized and lying in a hospital room. She seems to be utterly dejected by pain and agony which are the result of a series of obstetric experiences but from which she is released and feels an instant "emptiness" that pleases her.

Tulips

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring me sleep.
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage——
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat
stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free——
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
They are subtle : they seem to float, though they weigh me down,
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.
They concentrate my attention, that was happy
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health.

The speaker of this poem seems to have been tired of her everyday life with her family, where she is compelled to be a wife and mother, since she persistently tries to deny her associations with anything and anyone in her life, comparing herself to "a thirty-year-old cargo boat" (22) which empties itself. Now she is alone and anesthetized in her hospital room, and the numbness gives her "peacefulness" (3) by releasing her from various troubles for a while. Feeling the ease of numbness and being almost enticed by the state of eternal sleep, she feels as if she is "nobody" (5) and "utterly empty" (30), being free from pains or roles which she is doomed to have as a woman.

However, in spite of her desire, this transitory release from the troublesome situation of being a woman provided by the anesthetic is disturbed by a bunch of tulips. Though the speaker is insensitive to bodily pains, memories of those pains are brought to her as she sees the bloody color of tulips: "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (39). Thus communion with tulips—blood sisters connected with the speaker by their bloody color symbolizing female pains—is held by the speaker, and her dream is instantly drowned out. However hard the speaker may try to abandon her miserable maternal condition by comparing herself with an inorganic and untroubled "pebble"[3] (15) or a transcendental "nun" (28) who is supposed to be able to stay numb to various inconveniences, she is forced to be aware of her inevitable fate by bloody unity with tulips. Thus the poet's attempt to transcend female conditions in her poetry is fettered by blood sisters.

In such a communion with tulips (her blood sisters) the speaker cannot but reveal herself who fails to deny her own redness. The comparison to "a nun," a woman who severs herself from any "loving associations" (24) but is never freed from being a woman, shows the poet's submission to her gender. Imagery transition from "cargo

[3] Keiko Kimura argues that the stones in *The Bell Jar* or poems such as "Stones" are "the symbol of the oblivion"—or "almost of the state of death, as they are eroded and finally worn away by water" (51).

boat" to "a sunken rust-red engine" (54) attests her self-deprecatory attitude as someone who vainly struggles with her gender. Even if she were to let everything slip off and become a nun, she would be prescribed by redness until she dies. Thus she is aware of her fate with which she is doomed to struggle until her death. Snagging and eddying of water around the sunken engine in line 54 reflects the sense of incongruity which Plath had in her mind about the bodily existence of herself. Thus she objectively expresses her suffering in her poetry and, as George Steiner points out in his essay, never disregards the female physiological condition:

> It is the need of a superbly intelligent, highly literate young woman to cry out about her especial being, about the tyrannies of blood and gland, of nervous spasm and sweating skin, the rankness of sex and childbirth in which a woman is still compelled to be wholly of her organic condition. Where Emily Dickinson could—indeed was obliged to—shut the door on the riot and humiliations of the flesh, thus achieving her particular dry lightness, Sylvia Plath "fully assumed her own condition." (329)

Being haunted by blood sisters who drag her into solidarity, Plath does not make a transcendental pose in the way of Dickinson who consciously negates her bodily aspect.

Even so, Plath does not readily take part in "blood sisterhood" nor share the bitterness of tyrannies of blood. The solidarity of women never consoles her or abates her suffering. Instead, its threatening quality is rather emphasized. In Plath's poetry, red-colored motifs, especially red flowers, often appear to be unexpectedly dangerous, despite their ordinary pretty appearances. For instance, the speaker of "Poppies in July" (1962) is cautious of poppies' infernal ferocity and asks: "Little poppies, little hell flames, / Do you do no harm?" (1-2). First of all, what threatens the speaker in "Tulips" is the "redness" of tulips, as she says "The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me" (36). The loud color of blood lends contrast to the whiteness of surroundings: white walls, bed linens, nurses' white caps and the snowy landscape of winter. Then the speaker, who merges into the whiteness and keeps herself away from a bunch of tulips, especially blames the inappropriateness of a bunch of tulips, an eyesore disturbing the colorless place. In "Poppies in October" (1962), blood is also contrasted with the white color of the ambulance:

> Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
> Nor the woman in the ambulance
> Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly— (1-3)

And the poppies in this poem are "Utterly unasked for / By a sky" nor "by eyes / Dulled to a halt under bowlers" (5-9). The blood in this poem and "Tulips" is the blood which is to be flown out of a female body; therefore, we can see the poet's attitude toward female biological condition in it. The red color is also contrasted with blue color of "cornflowers" at the end of this poem:

O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers. (10-12)

The redness frequently put in inappropriate places reflects the sense of incongruity which Plath bears toward the female physiological condition. Then she cannot but ask "what am I," being displeased by the deplorable condition. Thus blood menaces her, when she sees it in tulips or poppies. Although it is usually contained within vessels under the skin, it ironically confines the poet's mind. Ted Hughes's "Red" in *Birthday Letters* also indicates such a characteristic of blood which Plath's poetry shows:

And outside the window
Poppies thin and wrinkle-frail
As the skin on blood, (18-20)

Here the skin barely confines the blood—the wild blood almost penetrates the frail skin. Some of Plath's poems have this kind of tension.

In the latter half of "Tulips," tulips do not only offend the speaker's eyes but actually threaten her. Since "tulips are too red," they hurt the speaker. Regarding the description of their characteristics in the sixth stanza, the speaker is also keenly aware of the hypocrisy of "blood sisterhood." Although tulips "lightly" breathe and pretend the innocence of a "baby," or harmlessly "float," they are "awful" and "weigh me down." The circle formed by the bunch of tulips, an imagery of a circle of fellowship, actually torments her as "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck." Round red petals of tulips are, through this imagery of red lead balls which form a ring, transformed into an agape mouth. In line forty-nine, "The vivid tulips eat my oxygen," and the speaker is forced into gasps. When the bunch of tulips are animatedly described as if they were "the mouth of some great African cat" which is to spring on her in the final stanza, the relation between the two becomes much more strained than ever. However, in this tense communion, the bond between the two appears to be cemented. In the fear of having her heart bitten by the monstrous tulips, she does not flee from them. Perhaps she just cannot move her anesthetized body, but if even so she describes the scene in flat tone. The speaker's heart "opens and closes" (60) as if it synchronizes with the bloom of

tulips, and the speaker even refers to "love" (61). The "white walls" surrounding the speaker and tulips are, though they stood still chilly and silently in the first stanza, now contentedly "warming themselves" (57), described animatedly as well as tulips. These walls may be the confines of the "blood sisterhood" which enclose the two. In this confinement, the speaker is cautious of the threat of tulips and feels the necessity of "bars" between tulips and herself, somehow rejecting her blood sisters, and yet apparently there is a certain bond between them.

Thus in "Tulips," Plath's attempts both of rejecting blood sisters and of being "utterly empty," transcending her troubles of body, gender and everyday life are somehow restricted by blood sisters which remind her of the tyrannies of blood. As the word "sisterhood" indicates, there is a certain bond between Plath and tulips, although it is not a comfortable solidarity but rather an oppressive bondage. Plath expresses how the two deal with each other from a careful distance and explores the ambivalent psychology of women. She explores her female identity in communion with her blood sisters.

1.2 Longing for the world beyond the "blood sisterhood"

Confined within the "blood sisterhood" discussed in the first chapter, Plath dreams of a transcendental state beyond female solidarity in another poem "Blackberrying." This poem is supposed to have been written after family picnic with her husband Ted Hughes and her daughter Frieda that took place in 1961. Plath gave birth to the first daughter the year before and again got pregnant shortly before she wrote this poem. The speaker of this poem rejects the connection between herself and her other blood sisters, this time through the picking of the blackberries in the middle of the picnic, so as to set herself free from the rankness of childbirth.

Blackberrying

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.

I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.
Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.
I do not think the sea will appear at all.
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

While in "Tulips" the blood sisters, tulips, unexpectedly attack the speaker who is lying on the hospital bed, the speaker in this poem voluntarily tends to blackberries, picking them up one by one. The pregnancy of the speaker is implied by images such as "sides" (9) which are flattening and "a blown sky" (11). As the resonance of "berries" and "bellies" (16) shows, there is a close connection between the pregnant speaker and blackberries. They can be also similarly characterized by their round shapes, since a pregnant woman has a roundly swollen belly and a berry has round shape consisting of smaller round grains which figuratively symbolizes the propagation.

Then a profound intimacy exists between the two. From the beginning of this poem, the speaker is alone in the lane with blackberries. She is affected with the female solidarity by blackberries which squander their blood-colored juices on her fingers, and calls them her sisters. There is even a sign of lesbian sexuality in this physical contact

between the two.[4] Nevertheless, she immediately rejects the connection by saying, "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me" (8). The poet's ambivalence shows itself in this line, and thus in this poem she explores the "blood sisterhood" from another angle. Although the speaker is aware of the absolute connection between herself and blackberries, referring to the "sisterhood" and even to "love," she shows a repulsion for them. The hook-shaped lane of blackberries rather indicates, even though it can suggest a circle of fellowship, the close confinement of femininity which traps the speaker. Then, as if she tries to escape from such a hypocritical solidarity, she makes her way in the expectation that the "sea" (3) may lie beyond the blackberry lane which means the liberation from the "blood sisterhood."

If we focus on the description of blackberries, it is clear that the poet again pursues the theme of the wretched physical condition of women in this poem. As we have seen, blood-colored motifs in Plath's poetry, though they bear connection with the speaker, are the targets for scorn or detestation. In "Blackberrying," as the ominously darkened color of blood ("blue-red juices" (7)) implies, the maternity in this poem is rather unhealthily expressed. For instance, berries are "so ripe" (15) that they are almost rotting, and fresh berries' sensuality is placed by the unpleasantness of "bluegreen bellies" of flies in the second stanza. These expressions reflect the poet's aversion for the nastiness of childbearing. Thus she seems to feel sick of the rankness of her own pregnant body, and the disgust is revealed in a communion with blood-colored motifs.

What surround such a communion of blood sisters, the pregnant poet and mature blackberries, are "the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks" (10). Here the bloody color of blackberries is still more morbidly and irreparably tarnished into jet-black of "choughs" by the ill-intentioned poet. Regarding the "cacophonous flocks" in this poem itself, "b" sounds are scattered throughout the whole poem as an abundant harvest of blackberries, among which alliterations and repetitions of words are exquisitely placed. Some of those unified sounds represent a surge of the emotion of the speaker. Focusing on the rhyme and internal rhyme in the first half part of the first stanza, the abundant [I:] sounds continuously resound as if the speaker hears the distant roll of the waves of "a sea" which is "heaving," reflecting that she has a vague presentiment for her childbirth. The poet seems to be urged to go down the blackberry lane against her will by this expectation for a new life, which she does not actually look forward to. There

[4] Ruriko Suzuki points out that the speaker is coming to admire the maternity through her physiological experiences, although she does not admit it. Then the lesbian affinity implied here will mean the identity achieved by the speaker, which is not achieved yet at this moment (177-178).

are other rhyming words, such as “thumb” / “dumb” and “squander” / “fingers”, and pleasing repeat of “l” and “m” sounds toward the end of the first stanza. Although these arranged sounds pleasantly resonate themselves, they are in dissonance with plenty of “b” sounds. Thus the poet expresses her gloomy feeling in the flock of dissonances.

Regarding the repetition of participles here and there, a sense of urgency which the speaker feels about her forthcoming childbirth is reflected in them. She is “blackberrying,” picking up blackberries that reflect the speaker’s maternity with their symbolic “sides” which they are “flattening,” though she is rejecting them in her heart. At that moment “a sea” is “heaving” (4), displaying a sign of a new birth as well, but she clearly hears the voice “protesting, protesting” (12) against such a sign from her heart. However, “the high, green meadows” in the second stanza are “growing, as if lit from within,” and child birth does not seem to be avoidable at all. “B” sounds now turn into buzzing of the swarm of flies, and flies are “hanging their bluegreen bellies,” reflecting the speaker’s disgust toward the childbearing, which is making steady progress. Thus some sense of urgency is in this poem, in the poet’s manner in her pregnancy. It could be gathered from Plath’s notes in her diary that this urgency is of the need for writing. As Hayman explains, after Hughes’s first book *The Hawk in the Rain* won the first Harper’s publication contest, Plath was motivated very much: “We will publish a bookshelf of books between us before we perish! And a batch of brilliant healthy children” (*Unabridged Journals* 270). Then, she wrote in July 1957, almost a half year later:

> I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children, and speak still deeper. The life of the creative mind first, then the creative body. For the latter is nothing to me without the first, and the first thrives on the rich earth roots of the latter. (286)

Therefore in this poem the poet is torn between the creative mind and the creative body, since she is eager to express her “deep self” as a pregnant woman, while her baby is waiting to be born out of her body. The time for the baby to be born is coming, and that frets the speaker.

Thus the poet seems to have an ambivalent emotion toward her own childbirth, and then she betrays the expectation for a new birth in the final stanza. Finally, the speaker arrives at the end of the lane, taking leave of blackberries and escaping the “blood sisterhood.” There she sees “nothing, nothing but a great space / Of white and pewter lights” (25-26). Here the indicative light of “green meadows” turns into a lifeless light that fills another world-like scenery that presented itself in place of “the

sea." Such "a great space" which consists of nothing but inorganic light and metal is not necessarily a hopeful view, but it can be an embodiment of an ideal world for the woman poet. There the poet will have nothing to do with childbearing and will be released from her wretched biological condition. However, of course such a world is scarcely realizable—it is rather vague and unsubstantial. It is dimly visible in the distance, but it seems unattainable. The emptiness of her ideal world exhibits a striking contrast to the reality which is given to the excessively fresh blackberries. They are in flesh and blood as well as the speaker and Plath herself, and then share her pain and agony. Thus the poet hardly gets out of the "blood sisterhood," even though she repels it.

Then "a din like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal" (26-27) reflects Plath's actual feeling toward the difficulty of the realization of such a world in her poetry. The poet consequently reveals herself coming to a deadlock. The silversmith can be the poet herself, who vainly writes about her desire to transcend the wretched condition of women. Though she repeatedly tries to deal with this difficult theme in her poetry, she is always haunted by her blood sisters whom she cannot shake off. "Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky" (11) may be the remains of those poems which show the poet's lack of success, full of cacophony which rings inside her.

As those two poems "Tulips" and "Blackberrying" show, Plath's attempts to escape from the "blood sisterhood" are unfruitful. She, who is suffering under the tyrannies of blood, goes round and round in circles, attended by her blood sisters, without reaching anywhere. The relation between Plath and red colored motifs is very close but also very complicated. The poet wishes to reject them, but she is also aware of the unbreakable bond of blood between the two at the same time. Having such an ambiguous attitude toward them, Plath persistently pursues the theme of the female physiological condition in her poetry. In regard to the word "intractable" in the final line of "Blackberrying," Helen Vendler argues as follows:

> The resistance of experience to meaning, expressed here in the word "intractable," appears in comparable words all through Plath's poetry: I note, at random, "indefatigable," "irrefutable," […] —a family of barriers to soul, mind, and body. Against those glassy barriers Plath heroically went about her business of constructing meaning, both psychic and literary. (280)

What Plath expresses in those two poems is rather irrational, visceral emotion toward her biological condition. She carefully and painstakingly expresses it, by describing her

close but complicated relations to her blood sisters. In this sense, the blood sisters, who lead the poet into meditation on her physiological condition and urge her to write about them, are close companions of the poet. They let her feel an inner calling, the need to express visceral things inside her. Therefore Plath attempts to reject her blood sisters, but regretfully she cannot do without them.

2. "There is nothing between us": Urge to escape the "blood sisterhood"

Another bond of blood associated by the phrase "blood sisterhood" is maternal female kinship; the blood-bond which especially connects a daughter and a mother in some of the poems of Sylvia Plath.[5] Considering her poetry, prose and journal writings, it seems that Plath generally has ambivalent emotions toward the relationship with her mother. She wavers between love and hatred, and she does not define her attitude through her poetry. First of all, the root of the wavering lay in her acute sense of the strength of the kinship. In June of 1951, she notes in her journal:

> Yes, you can outline the people you've lived with these eighteen years in a few sentences…yet could you give an account of their lives, their hopes, their dreams? You could try, perhaps, but they would be much the same as yours…for you are all an inexplicable unity—this family group with its twisted tensions, unreasoning loves and solidarity and loyalty born and bred in blood.
>
> These people are the ones most basically responsible for what you are. (65)

What she says here in regard to the family unity is quite an ordinary thing, but as this note and some of her poems attest, this "unity" continued to be a great concern for her, a daughter who was rather too sensitive and had a tense relationship with her mother. She cultivated a much closer relationship with her mother, who is connected with her through "a placenta," than any other members of her family. In this chapter, how the poet expresses the difficulty of escaping from this particular kind of "blood sisterhood" in two poems of hers will be explored. In these poems, the poet shows a grudge or hatred against her kin rather than an affinity.

2.1 Blood sisters as haunting Muses

As Hayman thoughtfully and analytically explains in the third chapter of *The*

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[5] Of course Plath writes about her own motherhood and the relationship with her children in many poems, but the scope of this thesis is limited to just the relationship with her mother.

Death and Life of Sylvia Plath, Aurelia's self-sacrificing devotion for Sylvia in their frugal living after her husband Otto's death caused Sylvia much psychological distress. The relationship between Sylvia and her mother was certainly based on love for each other but was also rather strained, as they were possessive of each other and Plath often felt extremely nervous about repaying Aurelia's goodwill (Hayman 40).

The poem "The Disquieting Muses" (1957) seems to be based on a scene from Sylvia Plath's childhood, since there appear a daughter, a brother and a mother in it. In addition, the poet makes a biographical reference to "Mixie Blackshort," her brother Warren's favorite teddy bear in the second stanza, and so the education-minded mother in this poem can be easily connected with Aurelia. Thus the poet, who seems to have been the young daughter under the mother's oppression, presents caricatures of her family in order to reproach her mother indirectly. The speaker addresses her mother both reproachfully and affectionately throughout this poem, and that cannot but remind the reader of the complicated relationship between Plath and her mother.

The Disquieting Muses

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve

Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
‘Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don’t care!’
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear mother.

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep.

Although in this poem the speaker generally seems to have a grudge against her mother, the ill feeling is somehow subdued in the little girl. The menace of her mother, being coupled with the fairy tale of the Sleeping Beauty in her juvenile mind, is embodied in three distressing witches. They at first appear as subordinates of the wicked witch, who is figurative of the mother, but at a certain point they emerge as three good witches chanting incantations after the wicked witch's curse on a newborn child. As Hayman points out, "the poem mixes autobiography with fiction and myth" (42), and that is done in the fanciful mind of a little girl. This mixing-up and the elusive character of the "three ladies" make things slippery. It seems that Plath complicates things intentionally, since even she herself cannot decide her attitude. As Sandra Gilbert points out in a documentary on Sylvia Plath, the speaker "is torn between being a decorous, a good girl who would please her mother and being a person who is committed to this sort of disquieting forces represented by the muse figures" ("Sylvia Plath documentary").

Then what sort of women are "The Disquieting Muses," the three ladies who go along with the speaker in her childhood? Firstly, the trio seems to be an embodiment of the menace of the mother to the daughter. This poem is written based on a painting of the same title by Giorgio de Chirico, an Italian surrealist painter, and Plath gave the following comment after she read this poem on a BBC radio program:

> All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting—three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women—the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, de Quincey's sisters of madness. (*Collected Poems* 276)

Thus Plath interprets three dummies in de Chirico's painting as the Fates in Greek

Mythology; the three goddesses who preside over the birth and life of humans, spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of human destiny. Then the poet, who might have been oppressed by her demanding mother, looks back to her childhood and mourns her fatal bond with her mother who was apt to count on her daughter too much. Nevertheless, the speaker, young Sylvia, does not directly blame her mother in this poem. Since she loves her mother in a way and longs to come up to her mother's expectations, she is forced to wonder how to give vent to her discontent. Therefore she fancies the presence of three witches to whom she can attribute her unfathomable misery. In this sense this trio, whose menace makes a direct contrast to the kindness of the mother who tells the speaker "stories" (9), bakes "gingerbread" (12) for her and praises her "arabesques and trills" (34), represents another aspect of the mother. These ladies are utterly invisible for the speaker's mother, while the speaker senses their presence everywhere in her life. Here the poet implicitly condemns Aurelia for being unaware that her devotion has had an adverse effect on her daughter. On the other hand, the poet ridicules the blindness of herself in her childhood as well. Even if the speaker perceives certain bitterness in the mother's sweet homemade "gingerbread," it is ascribed to a mischief brewed by evil witches. Here she is blind, but the skepticism about her mother's fierce dedication is awakening in her with the mental growth. Thus in this poem, the poet distinguishes two opposite aspects of the mother which disconcert the daughter by describing the real figure of the mother and a phantom trio in the vision of the young daughter.

Those three ladies have been watching the speaker day and night since she was born. As they are the embodiment of the threatening quality of the fatal bond of blood between her mother and herself, and as they are summoned by her mother to the speaker's christening in place of "illbred aunt" (1) and "disfigured and unsightly" (2) cousin, they can be considered almost as the equivalents of kin, blood sisters of the poet in a sense. These blood sisters, as well as the blood sisters examined in the first chapter, have a threatening quality against the speaker. First of all, their uncanniness frightens the little girl. She is always aware of "heads like darning-eggs" (6) of the trio "nod and nod and nod" (6-7) around her. They also have such strong, overpowering presences, that she persecutedly deludes herself into believing that they are the hurricane striking her house, echoing "boom boom boom" (22), again three repetitions. These three repetitions of a word may be associated with the three ladies forming a triangle which shuts in the speaker. This satirically reflects the oppressive nature of the "blood sisterhood" as a confinement, just as a dozen tulips and the blackberry lane introduced

in the first chapter enclose the speaker. It may reflect the girl's situation where she never feels free from anxiety, since her mother keeps watch on her from all directions.

Thus the speaker's fear for her mother produces her blood sisters, who disquiet her all the time. However, she gradually alters her attitude toward them in the middle of this poem. They turn out to be no longer witches who just threaten the little girl with their ominous attitude. Instead, they appear to be a kind of supporters of her, since she calls them "my dismal-headed / Godmothers" (30-31). In the fourth stanza, while other "schoolgirls danced" in the limelight, the speaker who cannot dance well miserably lingers in "the shadow" cast by the trio. Being ashamed about her own poor performance that never pleases her mother, she is to be completely swallowed in the dark silhouette of the ladies. The darkness is overwhelming, but at the same time it also shelters such a pitiable girl from the miserable situation and even attracts her. Moreover, three witches presently come to be called "muses" in the fifth stanza. The speaker insists that she learned "elsewhere" (39), probably alluding to the field of poetry, ruled by "muses unhired by you [mother]" (40).[6] Thus in this stanza the speaker talks about the time when she began writing poetry, which is an attempt of grasping the environment intellectually, including her relation with her mother of dual nature. She in this sense becomes a spinner of the thread of her own destiny, as the Sleeping Beauty who treads a spinning machine, longing to be released from her current confined situation.

As Hayman writes, this can be interpreted as an insinuation against her mother's education; she implies that she learned nothing worthy from her mother, despite her mother's frequent poetry reading to her in her childhood (42). At this time she goes out of the unreal world and gradually comes to face the sober reality, aware of the necessity of poetry. These ladies change their nature through this poem. The trio is no longer just an object for fear but a subject worth writing about. The speaker tries to confront the enigmatic figures right in the face, as her words repeating "I learned, I learned, I learned" (39) show a compromise with the encouraging trio. As they are called "muses" and "my traveling companions" (48), the speaker seems to see them favorably as her encouragers or supporters in her writing; and a source of inspiration themselves. She seems to feel the necessity to express the complicated relationship between her mother and herself, that is "blood sisterhood," a confinement in which both love and hatred

[6] She said in 1962 interview with Peter Orr, "I wrote my first poem, my first published poem, when I was eight-and-a-half years old." Hayman points out that the poet takes revenge on her mother by denying the mother's contribution (42).

toward kin swirl.

Thus “three ladies” turn out to be “muses” and “companions,” who urge the speaker to write about the theme of the female bond of blood in her poetry. She acknowledges them as “muses,” a stimulus for such difficult work. Although it needs intellectual power and takes a long time, the “companions” who travel along with the poet possess enough persistence. As the first five lines of the final stanza show, the “three ladies” haunt the speaker throughout her life. Here they still retain the haunting, ominous aspect of themselves, but for all that they provide a curious kind of security. As “they stand vigil” (50), they patiently watch the poet struggling to compose poems. Their “gowns of stone” (50) may be the symbol of a rational, intelligent mind over emotions and a tireless spirit necessary for the poet. Thus the “three ladies” have a reliable, even encouraging tenacity.

Thus in “The Disquieting Muses,” “three ladies” both bother and encourage the poet in a similar way to other blood sisters such as tulips and blackberries. Here their inspirational nature is more specifically shown, as they are called “muses.” The title of this poem precisely shows the nature of blood sisters; they disquiet and fret the speaker, but at the same time inspire the poet.

2.2 The absolute bond between mother and daughter

“Medusa” (1962) explores the second “blood sisterhood” more in depth. While it shows Plath’s attitude toward the particular relationship between her meddlesome mother and herself, it also makes an attack on the cramped nature of the universal mother-daughter bond as a whole. Again the allusion to a famous myth, the Greek myth of Gorgons, is a basic element of this poem, just as the myth of “the Fates” and Northern European “Thor” and the fable of the “Sleeping Beauty” are in the case of “The Disquieting Muses.” Concerning Plath’s mythologizing of the figure of her father in her poetry, Sandra Gilbert points out that the father is a vehicle for the poet through which she can also think about history and the world. Then Gilbert continues in regard to “The Disquieting Muses”: “The mother figure, though she is based on the real live mother, is really a kind of metaphor for terrifying female power” (“Sylvia Plath documentary”). Therefore the mythology is a means of generalizing her personal matters, allowing them to be connected to the larger things. In the poem “Medusa,” while the poet is keenly aware of the tenacious bond of blood, she paradoxically breaks out of the small confinement in a sense by enlarging and universalizing the situation which she faces.

Medusa

Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
Eyes rolled by white sticks,
Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,
You house your unnerving head—God-ball,
Lens of mercies,

Your stooges
Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow,
Pushing by like hearts,
Red stigmata at the very center,
Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure,

Dragging their Jesus hair.
Did I escape, I wonder?
My mind winds to you
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and greatful,
Touching and sucking.

I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralysing the kicking lovers.
Cobra light
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells

Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed, like an X-ray.
Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,
Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.
Off, off, eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us.

In this poem, the speaker addresses "you," who is full of features of Medusa, one of the Gorgons of the Greek mythology who has an "unnerving head" (4) with snakes in place of hair and the "paralyzing" (26) power in her "Red stigmata" (9), the eyes which glare as "Cobra light" (27). Besides, these Medusan characteristics also share the characteristics of jellyfish with arms like "Jesus hair" (11) which is associated with the hair of Medusa and a venomous, stinging "tentacle" (40) with which it paralyzes other creatures just as Medusan magical eyes do. As several scholars argue, the scientific name for the common jellyfish is *Aurelia aulita*, clearly including her mother's name.[7]Then in this poem, images are developed based on its title "Medusa," referring to both Gorgon and jellyfish that are supposed to reflect the oppressive power of Plath's real mother.

Then the poet seems to exhibit hostility to her mother, since she compares her mother to a hideous mythological figure. After the first long, muttering sentence which introduces us to the Medusan characteristic of the mother, the speaker asks herself if she could really escape from the Medusan menace in line 12. In this poem, Plath again

[7] Quinn says: "Several scholars have called attention to another name for the common medusa, Aurelia aulita—moon jellyfish—the first element suggesting Sylvia's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, and the second lunar symbolism" (98).

pursues the theme of escaping the "blood sisterhood," based on the physical separation of the two which actually happened at the time of her migration to England with her husband Ted Hughes. The speaker's mother, to whom the speaker addresses "you" throughout this poem, leaves "that landspit" (1), probably alluding to the end of Winthrop peninsula in Massachusetts where Aurelia's parents had lived and the Plath also moved to in 1936[8], to chase her daughter on the ship headed for England. Her "Eyes" are "rolled by white sticks" (2) as lenses of surveillance camera, and her "Ears" are "cupping the sea's incoherences" (3) with persistent curiosity. The speaker is obsessed by the mother's scrutiny and expresses it with the magical power of the eyes of Medusa. Here the poet seems to blame the mother for her meddling with her daughter who is living with her husband and children, as is shown in the phrase that "Medusa" paralyzes "the kicking lovers" (26). Even after Plath settled in England, Plath and Aurelia kept close contact with each other, as is intimated by the "Atlantic cable" (14) and "Tremulous breath at the end of my line" (17).

Such a possessive, highly nervous mother sets her "stooges" (6) in the "keel's shadow" (7). Here the menace of the mother is embodied in plural weird elements, similar to what occurs in "The Disquieting Muses." The "stooges" which are "Plying their wild cells" (7) in the shadow may reflect the fact that the daughter's aversion toward her mother's hypocrisy—which is implied by "Lens of mercies" (5) and religious allusions such as "Jesus hair" (11), "Blubbery Mary" (33) and "Ghastly Vatican" (36)—is bred steadily in her mind. Considering the analysis done so far in this thesis, the use of such plural elements haunting or encircling the speaker is a noticeable tendency of the poems which describe the "blood sisterhood." Anthony Libby interprets "stooges" as the speaker's fetuses and points out "a cycle of generation" suggested by the "placenta" of Plath and her mother (140). According to him, "Plath the mother," being caught up in the cycle and thereby paralyzed, "feels the oppression of babies as an aspect of some larger maternal force which winds into her own maternal mind along some ancient umbilicus" (140). This "larger maternal force" can be seen in the correspondence of Plath's action with her mother's; as Plath leaves the land, Aurelia leaves there as well to chase after Plath—however, Aurelia's departure is also an escape from her own mother as well as Plath's escape from Aurelia herself. For this point we adopt the hypothesis about the departing place which the "landspit" implies.

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[8] In regard to the "landspit"(1), Quinn suggests its relation to "this battered, obstinate spit / Of gravel" in "Point Shirley" (1959), which Plath finished after her revisit on her grandmother in Winthrop, as she wrote in her journal on 20 January 1959 (*Unabridged Journal* 463).

While the circular image is prevalent in this poem, the mother-daughter bond is emphasized by linear imagery that directly and firmly connects the two. The speaker and her mother are tied by some solid bond, which is implied by "Old barnacled umbilicus" (14) and associated with umbilical cord and "Atlantic cable" (14); and these images express the tie of great importance. The umbilical cord, which was already cut a long time ago, is still there "barnacled" (14), attesting the historical significance of the tie: the "Atlantic cable," which is supposed to let them communicate with each other over the sea, physically embodies the solid bond withstanding wild waves. Such historical and geographical dynamism is in the bond in this poem. Even though the speaker has already left her mother's womb and she left her mother and crossed the ocean, she can never be free from her mother. The imagery of circular or vibrating motions—such as rolling of "Eyes" (2), winding motion of the speaker's "mind" (13), a ranging shell whorls around "umbilicus"(14), "Tremulous breath" (17) and "Curve of water upleaping" (18)—shows surges of emotion toward each other. The cable conveys every kind of emotion, whether affectionate or malicious, and can withstand any hostility of the poet who compares her mother to a hideous mythological character. Or, those circular images may relate to a much larger circle of the "blood sisterhood" which includes the linear bond of the two. Thus the firmness of the "blood sisterhood" is expressed by linear images and then it is also attested to be universal by circular images.

The distance between mother and daughter in this poem is paradoxically closer than in any other poems of Plath, and as a result, they are almost made one. Then another circular image which shows the strong bond between mother and daughter appears in this poem—that is the image of nesting balls. The oneness of the two can be seen in the structure of jellyfish's round body which houses the "God-ball" (4), another smaller ball. This also implies the state of pregnancy and reminds us of the structure of something like nesting balls. The speaker of this poem is thoroughly accommodated by her mother, her threatening blood sister, while in other poems the speaker is just surrounded by circular motifs. In addition, Linda K. Bundtzen argues the suggestiveness of the use of medusan imagery as a central metaphor:

> …this [the medusa] is the immature form of the adult jellyfish, aurelia, so that it works as a code for her mother's name; but it also applies to the child, to Plath as an immature medusa to the adult aurelia. The double meaning contributes to the symbolic relationship Plath explores in "Medusa." (94)

Then images in this poem are developed around this double entendre, intertwining each

other. While the mother's menace is shown by plenty of medusan characteristics, the daughter, a victim of such threatening, is also compared to "the blood bells / Of the fuchsia" (28-29), which is similar to jellyfish in its shape, and described as "Overexposed, like an X-ray" (31), alluding to the transparent body of jellyfish—probably suggesting an embryo on the X-ray as well. Such an inextricable intertwisting of images reflects the symbolic relationship of mother and daughter and represents the difficulty in the poet's desperate attempt to escape the female kinship. She is still carried by her mother in a practical, physical way. It seems that Plath was aware of her uncanny resemblance to her mother, since once she wrote in her journal about her voice and expressions of her face so frighteningly like her mother's that she felt as if she was not quite herself (*The Unabridged Journal* 64-65).

In and after the seventh stanza, the speaker's voice takes on a more aggressive tone. She scornfully says, "Who do you think you are?" (32) She cannot stand this confined situation anymore and is dying to flee from the "blood sisterhood." Nevertheless, the "blood sisterhood" is too firm to break, as she knows. The final line shows this dilemma well: "There is nothing between us." This phrase has an ambiguity and can be interpreted in two opposite ways; firstly, it implicitly denies the relationship between mother and daughter: but it literally says that nothing separates the two. Thus this poem rather expresses an irresistible fate. In the poem "All the Dead Dears" (1957), Plath also shows a similar contradiction in her attitude toward the female kinship:

> How they grip us through thin and thick,
> These barnacled dead!
> This lady here's no kin
> Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
> Blood and whistle my marrow clean
> To prove it. As I think now of her head,
>
> From the mercury-backed glass
> Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother
> Reach hag hands to haul me in, (13-21)

Here the poet also presents the tenacious gripping power of kinship, "thin and thick" (13) oddly enough. Still she has a strong sense of kinship, for she is drawn even by her dead, distant kin. Such being the case, the poet feels as if she is helplessly drifting around the Atlantic Ocean, being bottled up in the "blood sisterhood." The bond of blood of Plath and her mother is in a sense like a mere, small bottle or a jellyfish in a

vast ocean, but Plath tries to present it as a universal matter. Libby argues that the "maternal forces" are no longer "described simply as the poet's own mother," because of "the mystic or divine context introduced" (140). The speaker's "mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother" are all included in the "blood sisterhood" which Plath explores in her poetry, which seems to suggests that it has been a universal concern for women through all time. Then Libby explains: "As *The Bell Jar* and various poems suggest, Plath may have felt oppressed by her own mother, […] but the personal obsession only leads to something more fundamental" (140). "[S]omething more fundamental," in this poem "Medusa," can be considered to be suggested in the basic elements of this poem: the allusion to the myth with the archetypal profoundness and the stage of this poem, the Atlantic Ocean. The latter is seemingly a boundless space where the poet would be released from the small bond of blood, but it rather appears to be a foundation of the bond for the poet. The "hot salt" (37) is the amniotic fluid of the motherly sea. In this huge womb, Plath and "mother, grandmother, and greatgrandmother" are all connected by the absolute bond of blood, forming a "blood sisterhood." Then the sea, the outer ball is a fundamental ground of the "blood sisterhood."

The imagery of the sea is one of the most important elements of Plath's poetry. Even in "Tulips" and "Blackberrying,"seemingly irrelevant to the sea, the water forms a quite important image, and it is related to the maternal aspect of the sea in some ways. In "Tulips," the water gives the speaker pleasantness by shutting out her everyday life. In the final stanza of the poem, the hospital room enclosed by white walls turns into a space like a womb, and the speaker feels the pleasantness of the water which is "warm and salt, like the sea"; however, she immediately suggests the unreality of such pleasant water like amniotic fluid by saying that it "comes from a country far away as health." Besides, the water of this poem certainly has an atmosphere of death, or suffocating power, as the speaker is sunk by lead sinkers around her neck to the bottom. In "Medusa," though the speaker wishes to get out of the mother's womb, there is also a kind of pleasure in this poem in the way jellyfish swims freely around her habitat ocean. Plath's recollection of her "childhood landscape," "the Atlantic," in her essay "Ocean 1212-W" (1962) shows her awareness of the ambivalence of the sea in her early years:

> Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary. […] It spoke miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill. When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and

> was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels. (*Johnny Panic* 20-21)

Thus, the poet seems to have been keenly aware of the existence of a larger, universal mother, while she grew up under the care of her real mother. At this time she already had an instinctive awareness of the ambiguity of the sea; her instinctive desire to nestle in her great mother's bosom, though it was prevented by her mother, allowed her to crawl toward it. This ambivalence of the sea—the safety and danger—is similar to that of the "blood sisterhood," whose tie can both embrace and strangle the sisters.

Therefore, Plath expresses the "blood sisterhood," the bond of female kinship, emphasizing the cramped and complicated nature of it by applying her personal experiences within a larger context of mythology and divinity. She also makes use of the dynamism created by the gap between the narrow "blood sisterhood" and the large-scale scenery of the Atlantic Ocean, in order to make the matter universal.

Thus in "The Disquieting Muses" and "Medusa," Plath expresses the cramped confinement and then enlarges it to more general situations. Such intention of the poet is clarified in the following remark by Plath, extracted from the interview with Peter Orr:

> I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences even the most horrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (*The Poet Speaks* 169)

Firstly, Plath argues that personal experiences should be informed by ways of expression that are directly related to one's senses. As we have seen in the first chapter, the sensuous imagery of blood can persuasively convey an ambivalent attitude toward visceral things. The paralysis under the Medusan power also stimulates the senses. Those sensuous images surely contribute to the embodiment of the oppression of the "blood sisterhood." Yet at the same time what they embody in her poetry should be

made "relevant to the larger things." Therefore Plath's poems almost always consist of her constant efforts towards balancing these two essential conditions.

Conclusion

Being confined in the "blood sisterhood" and threatened by her oppressive blood sisters, Sylvia Plath describes the complicated relationship with that sisterhood and explores her female, maternal identity. She in general dislikes being a member of the "blood sisterhood"—meaning both the bond of blood under the female physiological condition and the essential female kinship—, but she is fully aware that she can never separate herself from it. What confines her is the blood flowing in her, maintaining her life; and it also determines the role of woman as a giver of new life. Therefore, in the first place, she can never escape from the confinement of blood as long as she lives. In her attempts to escape the enclosure, she bumps and bumps against the wall only to reconfirm how firm and yet how warm the wall is. There is nothing but the realm of death beyond the wall. Thus Plath's attempts to go beyond the "blood sisterhood," even though she is never to be liberated from it, represent her strong but hopeless wish to lead a life free from any kind of fetters. Besides, as Plath doggedly pursues unrealizable liberation in that way, the sympathy with such a wish fraught with complication may be aroused from many, readers of both sexes, based on the sense of solidarity under a certain unhappy situation.

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